

## Is Length of Body Important?

It's amazing that the term "long-bodied" holds such a positive connotation for cattle breeders. Wherever and whenever beef cattle are evaluated, whether purebred or commercial, length of body as determined by a casual glance receives a major emphasis.

Most breeders accept length as an asset. In advertising breeding stock or in describing sale toppers and show winners there is almost a universal use of terms such as long-bodied,



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long-spined, stretchy, long-backed, and long-coupled. These terms are always meant to be complimentary. Still, the individuals using these terms never justify "length" as a contributor to increased efficiency of beef production.

**The fact is that length, in itself, is of no value in meat animals and therefore should not be a consideration for the following reasons:**

1. Beef carcasses are evaluated by maturity, degree of marbling, amount of fat and degree of muscling — length is not measured or considered.
2. There is absolutely no research data or evidence of any kind to support the belief that the length of a beef animal influences reproductive efficiency, growth rate or carcass desirability.

It's very common in the cattle industry to hear people refer to differences in length of neck, loin or rump as a method of evaluation. The implication is that a certain animal is superior because it has a greater or lesser percentage of its length in a certain segment or area. This is simply not true. Such opinions are the result of inaccurate observation resulting from illusions caused by differences in slope of shoulder, muscular development or fat deposition.

**Animals grow proportionately.** For example, the entire spinal column or backbone grows in concert. Therefore, the various segments are a constant percentage of the total length of the spinal column. This is true in all cattle.

A small-framed animal has a shorter backbone than a larger framed one, but the neck or loin region or any other segment of the backbone is a constant percentage of total length.

Likewise, the fact that animals grow proportionately explains why each wholesale cut — chuck, rib, short loin, loin end, rump and round — of a carcass represents a constant percent of the total carcass weight.

A cull, canner Jersey cow carries the same percent of carcass weight in the hindquarter, or any wholesale cut, as does an ideal slaughter steer. The difference in the cuts' value per pound is in the percentage of lean, fat and bone and the tenderness, juiciness and flavor of the lean. This eliminates the use of the often heard phrase, "more weight in the high priced cuts" — it's just a figment of someone's imagination and should not be used.

Another common belief is that "length" is an indication of breeding and feeding capacity. However, linear measurements do not predict either reproductive efficiency or the amount of feed an animal can or will eat. Neither do such measurements predict rate or efficiency of gain.

Furthermore, "length" does not provide a history of an animal's performance. An absolutely accurate measure of the current length of cattle can be greatly influenced by differences in age, sex, plane of nutrition, management or climate.

**Informed visual appraisal** of cattle can result in an excellent estimate of carcass composition and soundness of structure but such appraisal is of little value in determining genetic potential for other performance traits. To measure genetic differences cattle must be compared at the same time, at the same place, at the same age, of the same sex and under the same management and nutrition.

The use of "length of body" in describing or attempting to evaluate beef cattle yields no information except to indict the user's competence.